

AMHERST REDEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

MINUTES

January 31, 2011

LOCATION: Town Room, Town Hall

MEMBERS PRESENT: Aaron Hayden, Lawrence Kelley, Margaret Roberts, Jeanne Traester (Coull absent)

OTHERS PRESENT: Todd Diacon, Nancy Buffone, Lisa Queenin, Niels la Cour (UMass representatives), Tony Maroulis (Amherst Area Chamber of Commerce), Scott Merzbach (Daily Hampshire Gazette), Stephanie O’Keeffe (Select Board), Maurianne Adams, Sue Hugus, Louis Mainzer, Lyle Wilson, Mickey Marcus, Joan Burgess, Judy Sechrest, Tom Ehrgood, David Webber (Planning Board liaison), Jerry Gates, Nancy Higgins, Barry Roberts, David Williams, Jim Brassord (Amherst College), Kevin Eddings (Committee on Homelessness), Andy Churchill, Claire Bertrand, David Bryne, John Fox, Walter Wolnik, Jim Lescault (Amherst Media), others

STAFF PRESENT: John Musante (Town Manager), Jonathan Tucker (Planning Director).

Mr. Coull called the meeting to order at 7:31 p.m., and noted that the meeting was being recorded and televised.

Announcements

Mr. Tucker indicated that, at an upcoming meeting, the Authority needed to meet with businesses interested in restoring the Boltwood Walk directory signs.

Appearances

Mr. Musante introduced the appearances, indicating that he and Mr. Diacon wanted to clarify the positions of the Town and UMass with regard to the Gateway Corridor project, and to talk about the public visioning process going forward.

He reviewed the history of the project to date, saying that it had been rushed in early 2010, with too early an emphasis on details. In the fall, at a joint meeting of the Authority and Planning Board, he had recommended that the Authority slow the project down and bring all the stakeholders together to engage in a visioning process for the corridor. It would be an intensive participatory process with opportunities for input from all of those with a stake in the project.

Deputy UMass Chancellor Todd Diacon said there were three reasons why the University supported the Gateway Project.

First, it would create a signature attraction that would assist in UMass recruitment of high quality faculty and students—an eye-catching mixed use development at the gates of UMass that would appeal to faculty, staff, students, administrators and others.

Second, it would connect the campus with the downtown to the benefit of both. It would encourage people on campus to walk downtown, and vice-versa. He was excited about the possibilities of the Gateway project. It would create a walkable neighborhood in keeping with the Amherst Master Plan.

Third, it would create a neighborhood for all—campus users, Amherst citizens, and visitors alike.

Mr. Diacon emphasized that it would be fine with UMass if no undergraduate students lived in the Gateway project. The 1,500 bed undergraduate honors college currently under design on campus would meet the University's near term housing needs. UMass wanted to be a part of the conversation in a responsible public process.

Town Manager John Musante emphasized four goals for the project.

First, it had to create development that the community wants. He envisioned it as including a multi-generational residential mix. There would be a thriving walkable mixed-use boulevard along North Pleasant Street that would connect the campus to downtown businesses, destinations like Kendrick Park and the Jones Library, and with historic sites like the Dickinson Homestead. It ties in with the Business Improvement District (BID) project underway.

Second, the mix of housing types, including owner-occupied homes, would strengthen and enhance the existing neighborhoods. The Town would work with its partners to address longstanding problems through enhanced code enforcements and other means.

Third, the project would expand the tax base, create jobs, and attract new customers to Amherst and its downtown.

Fourth, the project increases community control over development in the area. UMass owns a significant core property. As an arm of the Commonwealth, it does not have to follow local zoning controls. There will be development here. The University is willing to work with the community to create something of mutual advantage. This is the opportunity, and there was a sense of urgency.

Mr. Musante said he was issuing a challenge to all of those who were interested in the outcome of this project, including nearby neighbors, to come to the table. They should engage in the visioning process, participate, and shape the future of this area.

He indicated that there was precedent for this kind of project all over the country. He applauded the Authority for investigating the range of possibility and crafting the visioning process. The community should take the best of what was out there and use it.

The Gateway project could provide a connection to Kendrick Park should be a project that succeeds—one that actually gets done, and belies Amherst's reputation. He thought Amherst could do this. It had the talent. The community could do something special along North Pleasant Street.

Public Comments & Questions

Maurianna Adams of Beston Street appreciated the clarifications, which were different from earlier documents,

She cited the September 1 Agreement between the Town, ARA and UMass, which included declarations of intent for the creation of student housing. Was there any plan to revisit those documents? Mr. Musante replied that the next documents will be the vision statements. Mr. Diacon said that the Agreement had mostly been a statement of good faith cooperation, and was not legally binding on the parties. Mr. Kelley pointed out that Mr. Diacon had just said that it would be fine with UMass if there were no undergraduate students living in the Gateway project.

Joan Burgess of Mount Pleasant Street said there were some financial questions. She thought financial feasibility was an issue, but it was not included as a task under the RFP. She said some broad measures were needed—goals to meet. Mr. Musante said he was a numbers person himself. The Town needed a vision and a sense of scale before it could start assessing financial feasibility. That would not be available until near the end of the visioning process. Mr. Diacon stressed that he was not a numbers person. He noted that once zoning had been adopted making the Gateway project feasible, UMass would deed over the land to the Town.

There was discussion of what an assessment financial feasibility might include. Mr. Musante said that approximate numbers would be the best the Town could do, given the variability in potential development outcomes.

John Fox, Fearing Street, said he appreciated the clarifications from the Town and UMass. He read aloud the ARA summary statement for the project, including the phrase “provision of significant amounts of appropriate student housing.” He asked if the ARA was willing to change that language. Mr. Kelley replied that the ARA had moved away from that. Mr. Fox insisted that if the language remained, that outcome might come about.

Andy Churchill said the Town and the ARA should pursue something fiscally sound, to do what makes sense for use and users in the area. He asked what other communities were doing. He urged the Town and ARA not to foreclose the option of student housing. He noted that the current situation in the neighborhood was not good, and that change was an opportunity to make it better—student housing should not be taken off the table if it was a viable use for the corridor. He emphasized that new property tax revenue was also a priority for the community—he had watched the erosion of funding for the schools and this needed to be reversed.

Sue Hugus of Fearing Street asked who would be responsible for controlling student housing. She cited the example of State College, PA, where campus-edge neighborhoods had deteriorated badly. She favored enforcement by UMass, as well as other entities. She recommended looking at a variety of business options for the corridor.

Mr. Kelley replied that the work of the Campus Community Coalition was paying off. Fines for nuisance house behaviors were working.

Mr. Diacon said he didn't know who would live in the corridor. That would be Amherst's decision to make through the visioning process. He notes that UMass's efforts at encouraging student responsibility had just won an award. He acknowledged that there were issues to overcome.

Ed [surname not given], a current UMass student, noted that the vacant land had originally been student housing. He said that urban renewal regulations required the replacement of existing housing. That should be factored into any plan.

Amherst had no passenger rail service. The Baby Boomlet was over. The new student population was returning veterans and grad students—UMass's student body was going to change.

Kevin Eddings of Precinct 5 indicated that he was speaking as a member of the Committee on Homelessness. The Committee had conducted a study to identify suitable sites for permanent housing for the homeless. The Mount Pleasant Apartments building in the Gateway corridor was on the list. He wanted to remind the Town and ARA of that intent.

Mr. Musante replied that the Town was not in negotiations with any property owner in the corridor for that purpose. The visioning process had not occurred, so identifying any property for any purpose would be premature.

Judy Sechrest, Lincoln Avenue, said that once a property was handed over to a developer, all local control would be lost. For that reason, the Town should be very careful. The Town could not legislate who lived in a given location. Supervision of student housing would be critical.

Mrs. Roberts and Mr. Tucker described the ways in which urban renewal provided control over how a property was developed.

Next Meetings

The ARA set its next meetings for February 9, 14 and 22.

Executive Session

At 8:50 p.m., Mrs. Roberts MOVED: To go into executive session to comply with the provisions of state law regarding public procurement of services, and then to return to open session. Mr. Hayden seconded, and the vote was as follows: Mr. Kelley – Aye; Mr. Hayden – Aye; Mrs. Roberts – Aye; Ms. Traester – Aye.

At 9:18 p.m., Mr. Hayden MOVED: to adjourn from executive session and return to open session. Mrs. Roberts seconded, and the vote was as follows: Mr. Kelley – Aye; Mr. Hayden – Aye; Mrs. Roberts – Aye; Ms. Traester – Aye.

At 9:19 p.m., Mr. Hayden MOVED to adjourn the meeting, and the vote was unanimous (4-0)

Respectfully submitted,

Lawrence Kelley, Vice Chair